Pragmatic underspecification of tag question evidentials in Mi'kmaq

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Puzzle: Mi'kmaq (Algonquian) has a verbal suffix *-s(ɨ)p(n)* which receives tag question interpretation in a sentence. This question tag suffix is *prima facie* composed of the direct and indirect evidential suffixes *-p(n)* and *-s(n)* (all Mi'kmaq examples from Inglis 2002).

    (1)   *I'-wape'kɨ-p.*   (2)   *I'-wape'kɨ-s.*
            PAST-white-DIR   PAST-white-IND
            'It used to be white.'   'It used to be white, so I'm told.'

    (3)   *I'-wape'k-sɨp.*
            PAST-white-TAG
            'It used to be white, didn't it?'

We provide an account of the tag question suffix which derives its pragmatic properties from the interaction of the direct and indirect evidential suffixes.

Background on tag questions: Although little formal work has been done on the semantics of tag questions, the literature on the subject assumes that they have the same logical form as negative polar questions (Reese & Asher 2010). Negative polar questions are observed to differ from positive questions in that they convey a backgrounded speaker attitude, or bias: that the speaker at some point had expected a positive response to the question (Givon 1979, Ladd 1981, Horn 1989 et al.). This bias is treated on some accounts as following from the interaction of the semantic content of an interrogative sentence and pragmatic principles (Romero & Han 2004). Other treatments take biased questions to be a complex speech-act type (Reese & Asher 2007, 2010), *assert ● question,* carrying a hybrid illocutionary force: the sentence asserts *p*, and questions *?¬p*.

Two readings for Mi'kmaq tag questions: Negative polar questions in English with preposed negation, like their counterparts with low negation, convey the sense that the speaker previously expected or believed in the likelihood of a positive response. However, they are not pragmatically equivalent: this sense is much stronger for negative questions with preposed negation than for those with low negation (4) (Romero & Han 2004). Romero & Han account for this difference by proposing that preposed negation introduces the epistemic operator VERUM FOCUS, which necessarily gives rise to a non-cancelable 'positive epistemic implicature.'

    (4)   Scenario: The speaker is organizing a party and she is in charge of supplying all the
            non-alcoholic beverages for teetotalers. The speaker is going through a list of people that
            are invited. She has no previous belief or expectation about their drinking habits.
            A: Jane and Mary do not drink.
            S: OK. What about John? Does he not drink (either)?
            S': # OK. What about John? Doesn't he drink (either)?   (Romero & Han)

Mi'kmaq tag questions display the same pragmatic properties as negative polar questions with both high and low negation, depending on context.

    (5)   [while looking at a closed window in a room which is cold]
            Panta'tek-sɨp tuo'puti.
            open-TAG window

'The window, it was open, wasn't it?'

(6)   *I'-wape'k-sɨp to'q.*
        PAST-white-TAG COMMUNITY.KNOWLEDGE
        'It used to be white, didn't it? [everyone knows that]'
        (neighborhood history tells me that it used to be white)

In (5), the speaker conveys that she expects confirmation that her statement is true, while being open to contradiction. In (6), however, compatibility with the *to'q* particle shows that the speaker holds a propositional belief that the object in question used to be white.

Proposal: We propose that the *-s(ɨ)p(n)* suffix is pragmatically underspecified such that it yields two readings: 1) an inference that the speaker expects a positive response to the prejacent, and 2) a non-cancelable inference that the speaker believes the prejacent to be true. We propose that these readings result from differing scope interactions of the direct and indirect evidential suffixes that comprise the question tag suffix. In the first reading, the statement expresses the speaker's belief about the evidential relation of the addressee to the proposition expressed by the prejacent: belief about what reportative evidence with respect to the proposition should be. In the second reading, the speaker is making an assertion about her own epistemic state with respect to a reported proposition.

Observations and implications: The proposed analysis yields the two readings as the result of the scope interaction of two overt morphemes, rather than by introducing an extra operator. It also captures the intuition of Reese & Asher that biased questions occupy an intermediate position between question and assertion. We note that opposite polarity tag questions in English also carry both readings and propose that prosody plays a role in disambiguating them. The analysis also correctly predicts that statements with the *-s(ɨ)p(n)* suffix fail as alternative questions, and predicts a gap in the evidential paradigm: the tag-question suffix is not available for verbs in the first person, as this would create vacous interpretations on both readings.

Selected references

Inglis, S (2003) The deferential evidential in Mi'kmaq. Algonquian Conference. **Ladd, DR (1981)** A first look at the semantics and pragmatics of negative questions and tag questions. CLS. **Reese & Asher (2010)** Biased questions. In *Information structure: theoretical, typological, and experimental perspectives*, eds. Zimmermann and Féry. **Romero & Han (2004)** On negative yes/no questions. L&P.